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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIJING 011756

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV SOCI KCUL CH
SUBJECT: MEDIA TESTS LIMITS ON COVERING LEADERS' PERSONAL LIVES

Classified By: Classified by Acting Political Internal Unit Chief Susan A. Thornton. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

¶1. (C) The envelope-pushing Southern Weekend newspaper recently challenged a longstanding taboo on reporting on the private lives of retired leaders when it published a retrospective on the activities of Jiang Zemin, Li Peng, and other recently-retired leaders. Embassy contacts said that the paper was testing the limits of media guidance by running the story, but noted that guidelines are often ignored if the topics are not core Party issues and are handled with tact. One contact close to the paper said that Southern Weekend was criticized for the article by Guangdong media authorities at the behest of the Central Propaganda Department, but that there were no further repercussions. He explained that there is a de-facto loosening of taboos on coverage of leaders' personal lives in line with the Party's efforts to institutionalize limits on top leaders' tenure in office. Another contact said current relations between the Government and media are a negotiation, with the Central Propaganda Department asserting its interests along with those of other bureaucratic players. End Summary.

Rare Inside Look at Leaders

¶2. (C) The Southern Weekend feature on retired leaders, carried on the front page of its May 11 edition, not only provided details on former leaders' private lives, but reported the names of close relatives and friends. Jiang's activities were highlighted under a large color picture of the group of former leaders while still in office and an editor's note in bold type stating that the paper had relied on previously published reports and its own interviews to give readers a glimpse of what life is like for the leaders now and "how they are getting along." The description of Jiang's activities was followed by vignettes on former National People's Congress Chairman Li Peng, former Premier Zhu Rongji, former Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference Chairman Li Ruihuan and former Vice Premier Li Lanqing on internal pages. The editors expressed regret that they did not have enough information to include a piece on former head of the Party's Central Discipline Inspection Commission Wei Jianxing.

Testing the Limits

¶3. (C) Well-connected journalists confirmed to Poloffs the highly unusual nature of the article, but said Southern Weekend had not asked permission to publish the piece and was testing the limits of Party strictures on covering the private lives of retired leaders. Fang Jinyu (protect), former Beijing bureau chief of Southern Weekend and currently head of the Southern Daily Media Group's Beijing office, said the paper's editor-in-chief, who was himself generally reluctant to challenge the censors' limits, calculated that since much of the information had already appeared in Chinese media, he had a measure of political cover.

¶4. (C) Nonetheless, according to Fang, the Central Propaganda Department ordered the paper's administrative superior, the Guangdong Provincial Party Committee's Southern Daily Media Group, to investigate the incident. Fang himself drafted the investigative report that concluded the paper had violated propaganda guidance that provincial papers are permitted to carry only Xinhua reports on central leaders. Fang said no further action was taken against the paper and that the chief editor's high stature in the Guangdong media world might have been a factor. As the former deputy director of the provincial propaganda department and director of the provincial Party committee's information bureau, the editor retains considerable influence. Further attesting to the low-key handling of the matter, He Jiangtao (protect), a journalist and editor for the Guangdong magazine Southern Window, called media contacts in Guangdong in the presence of Poloffs and was told the paper had not been criticized and was not

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in trouble.

Line Becoming Fuzzy

¶5. (C) A slight loosening of taboos on coverage of retired leaders' personal lives in the past two years may have emboldened the paper's editor to take the risk in publishing the story. Zhang Guangyou (protect), former chief editor of Farmer's Daily and longtime embassy contact said the paper had not only protected itself by portraying the leaders in a very positive light, but was likely mindful of changes in the broader media environment. Zhang noted that Zhu Rongji "talks a lot" to people in Party circles and that media had previously publicized Li Ruihuan's charitable activity and Li Peng's books. In fact, much of the information recounted in the Southern Weekend piece had appeared in provincial Party papers, wire services, and institutional websites, while retired leaders' personal recollections of their government service have been reported in mainstream media and are displayed for sale in major bookstores. Since January, for example, Li Peng's memoirs of his tenure in the National People's Congress was promoted by China's official news agency Xinhua, Jiang Zemin's visit to his alma mater Jiaotong University in Shanghai was given high-profile treatment on the university's website, and Li Ruihuan's financial aid to poor university students was given major play in the Tianjin Party committee daily.

The Shifting Ground of Media Control

¶6. (C) Providing the broader context for official reaction to the Southern Weekend story, Fang said the Party had recently severely tightened controls on media coverage of "core" issues but actually loosened

its grip on "minor" issues. Coverage of leaders' private lives was increasingly considered a minor issue, if handled appropriately, and was related to the political issue of abolishing lifetime tenure for senior leaders. To underscore his point, Fang noted he had recently written another investigative report at the behest of propaganda authorities severely criticizing a Guangdong magazine, Southern Weekly on Prominent Personalities (Nanfang Renwu Zhoukan), for violating media rules on a "core" issue. It had run a piece on the 10th Panchen Lama's daughter and might be shut down as a result.

¶7. (C) He said that a paper like Southern Weekend is constantly in a "danger zone," disclosing that he was asked to resign as the paper's Beijing bureau chief a year ago to lower the paper's profile after he wrote an article exposing corruption among high-level officials in Guangdong charitable organizations. Fang also said Southern Weekend had tested the limits on leadership coverage once before, shortly after Hu Jintao came to power, when it published personal details on the new Party leader. At the behest of his superiors, Fang profusely apologized to central propaganda authorities and as a result there was never any written censure.

¶8. (C) He Jiangtao separately agreed that the Southern Weekend editor had taken a calculated risk, but said that Party taboos on some sensitive topics are often ignored. He explained that editors assess the risks, make the call, and wait to see what happens. He described the context of media control as akin at times to a bargaining arena, with the Central Propaganda Department asserting its interests along with those of other bureaucratic players.

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